

LOCAL STUDENTS COMPLETE AUTISM WORKSHOP

BY PEGGY TODD

The northeast region has the added knowledge and resources of 24 more people that are equipped with the training required to effectively work with autistic children as a result of a week-long workshop held in Nipawin last month.

The Alex Wright School served as the venue for the "Training the Trainer - Hands-On Training" Autism workshop April 21st through 25th. This is the second year the Northeast Chapter of the Saskatchewan Families for Effective Autism Treatment (SaskFEAT) has been able to offer the program in partnership with the North East Early Childhood Intervention Program (NEECIP). Grant funding was provided by the Regional Intersectoral Committee (RIC).

Utilizing Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) with Discrete Trial Instruction, students participated in practical hands-on training with eight children between the ages of four and nine years of age from White Fox, Nipawin, and Tisdale. One afternoon practicum also allowed the students the opportunity to work with children between the ages of nine and twelve years.

Through seminars held during the week, the students learned the basic principles of ABA and discrete trials under the instruction of former Nipawin resident Dr. Janet Butz, who now resides in Las Vegas. The basic principles of ABA involves rewarding children for positive behaviour, a principle that can also successfully be applied to children with Attention Deficit Disorder, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, and Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, as well as typical children.

With reference to autism, ABA addresses the numerous challenges autistic children may face. These may include low motivation, a limited reinforcement repertoire, short attention span, easily distracted, slower learning capacity, difficulty with understanding concepts, difficulty

learning through observation, difficulty differentiating between relevant and irrelevant stimuli, difficulty learning in large groups and sensory/motor impairments.

Through a series of discrete trials, therapists who have trained in ABA work on a one-on-one basis with a child to learn language, play and social skills. The skills are taught in small, brief units referred to as trials, which include instruction, a prompt, an opportunity/response, and feedback. The intensity in which ABA is delivered is what makes the program successful.

In addition to Butz, additional instructional assistance for the week-long workshop was provided by Denise Decker-Donahue of New York state, as well as two local assistants – Mandy McGirr and Shirley Miller, a graduate of the first “Training the Trainer” workshop which was held last February.

Among the students that participated in the workshop were six from Tisdale and Nipawin, three from the NEECIP office, and 15 students of Cumberland Regional College’s Teacher Assistant program. According to Sandy Neely, instructor of the TA program, the workshop was a valuable resource for her students.

“It was absolutely amazing. They worked hands-on with kids for most of the five days and learned techniques to keep them engaged in activities,” she said. “They learned so much more from working with kids than reading theory in a text book.”

According to Lois Preete, Executive Director of NEECIP, the workshop is another alternative for those working with both special needs and typical children. “ABA provides another strategy for teachers, parents, or anybody to use with children and, it doesn’t have to be with autistic children.”

“Anytime you expand your knowledge base and techniques, you’re better able to deal with a situation,” Preete continued. “It’s another tool in their box.”

The week-long sessions were met with positive and enthusiastic response from the students, the instructors, and the children themselves. In addition to receiving a certificate for the successful completion of the workshop, the students are now equipped with the tools that will give

them more understanding of and the appropriate skills to deal with the sometimes demanding and complex needs of not only children with autism, but for all children.

The Autism Workshop would not have been possible with the support of the Kelsey Trail Health Region, CRC, local school divisions, the P.A. Grand Council, Autism Treatment Services of Saskatchewan (ATSS), the president of the Autism Society of Canada, the Saskatchewan Society of the Autistic, and the Saskatchewan Association of Community Living. Organizers also acknowledge the Nipawin School Division, who permitted the use of the Alex Wright School for the workshop, and the school custodians for the extra effort they put in to make the workshop a success.